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POTENTIAL TOURIST DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT IN THE ISTRIAN COUNTRYSIDE

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Abstract: The modern comprehension of tourist behaviour shows an urgent need to create a tourist destination as a system. Tourism supply needs to be integrated and well coordinated, including all necessary amenities for an enjoyable stay. The paper analyses tourists' attitudes in coastal destinations of Istria towards sustainable tourist supply in the Istrian countryside. The Karst landscape of Istria consists of rural areas that provide ideal opportunities for rural tourism development.

An empirical research was carried among the sample of 538 tourists in coastal tourist destinations of Slovenian Istria. Findings and implications of the research are given in the paper. There were found characteristics and preferences of potential tourists. The main finding of the research is that more marketing efforts should be made to attract target markets of tourists.

Key words: tourism destination, Karst landscape of Istria, rural areas, sustainable tourism.

BACKGROUND

Destinations are places of particular interest to tourists. They all have some basic elements (attractions, infrastructure, services...), location and story. They should be different and had to have a clear position at the marketplace. They all could be tourist destinations, but the question is for how long? A successful tourist destination is seen in tourist eyes (and marketplace) as a whole of different tourist offers and services at the same place. For them the destination is a functional unit that has a unique spirit. This perception is mostly correlated with the fact that the only sensible tourist product in destinations is the integral tourist product: the one which is comprised from many different combinations of particular tourist products and services that represents different tourist's choices at the specific time.

The interdependency of the elements which together make up tourist destinations, and the balance of effects of tourism (good or harmful) on various interest groups can best be understood from the perspective of a soft, open, systems model. Every destination has a unique mix of characteristics which are determined by its geographical location, culture and history. These together with the area's degree of dependency on tourism, and the industry's seasonal and structural characteristics, influence the experiences of both visitors and residents (Laws, 1995).

System theory argues that the efficiency of the destination's operations will be affected by changes to any of the elements of which it is composed. That is why the system (destination) has to be planned, organized, managed, coordinated and continuously evaluated.

It is often argued that sustainable rural tourism development cannot be achieved without the full support of the rural community that it will affect. Rural tourism does not develop in a vacuum but is embedded in a given social, political and historical context (Verbole, 2000). A sustainable approach to the development of tourism can only be achieved if the government, private sector and the local population work hand-in-hand to achieve this goal. Essentially sustainable tourism involves the minimization of negative impacts and maximization of the positive ones.

There is a vast body of literature investigating rural tourism in the last decade according to Hernandez Maestro, Munoz Gallego and Requejo (2007). It confirms the importance of research concerning with rural tourism. Moreover, ecotourism, which is strictly connected with the modern rural tourism context, is becoming increasingly popular in the past decade refers to the development and promotion of environmental attractions (e.g. natural parks) and activities (e.g. catch-and-release fishing, organic agriculture) for the specific purpose of conserving the environment and generating income for its surrounding local communities. Already, the evidence is that ecotourism could pay off in economic terms. The travelling public's interest in nature and adventure travel is at an all-time high and still growing (Poon, 1993).

The observed area is typical agricultural area with practically no tourist infrastructure and supply, however it has a great developmental possibilities because of the rich natural and cultural heritage as a potential resource for the tourist destination development that could offer to tourists some new and different contents from those that they are "used to" in some urban, coastal areas in Istria.

Natural and cultural resources of the area are based on unique Mediterranean natural attractions of the Karstic landscape and on a high degree of natural biotic diversity that is widespread (Bojnec et al., 2007). These natural attractions are combined with a rich cultural heritage, Mediterranean climate and favourable transport connections that provide advantages for tourism development. Timothy (2000) argues that the principles of sustainable development can be implemented more efficiently through cross-border cooperation. Also Vodeb (2006) claims that integration into a broader area has become an economic and technical precondition for survival, with integration processes requiring networked spatial arrangements, a concept that in every way exceeds the concept of a national economy.

But before we go across the border we have to ask ourselves if the Istrian countryside is interesting for the tourists to spend their holidays. That is why we have conducted a research between the potential tourists in coastal, urban, and well-known destinations as Portorož and Piran.

As mentioned before, the observed area is touristic underdeveloped with practically no tourist infrastructure and supply. That is why we have turned to the potential tourists at the nearby coastal destination, to check if they would be interested in spending their holidays at the Istrian countryside. At first (in initial development phase of the new destination) it could be an additional content of their usual touristic products and then (in advanced development phase of the destination) it is possible to become independent self-sufficient destination with its integral tourist products.

Campbell and Harald (2009) warned that there is an increasing demand for new products in tourism. Especially nowadays, when preferences and trends of the tourism market are highly changeable and cultural and natural resources become more often part of travel motives, is urgent to search the ways for unforgettable experiences that exceeds guest satisfaction.

METODOLOGY

In this paper we have presented our results of research conducted in Slovenian part of developed urban (coastal) tourist destinations in Istria. The principal aim of the research was to find out if there is an interest of tourists in spending their holidays in the Istrian countryside. These empirical results are based on the collected data using written self-administrated questionnaire. The results of this research will be considered in broaden process of planning the tourist offer on Karstic landscape of Istria. The questionnaire was originally written in Slovenian language and then translated into Italian, English and German language for foreign tourists. The research is limited to the Slovenian part of Istria. There were collected 538 questionnaires. The survey was undertaken in October 2007.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Data analysis was conducted using MS Excel. Simple frequencies were generated to analyse the results. Table 1 shows that one third of interviewees have decided for tourist offer in Istria on the base of preliminary visit. Additional one third of tourists were informed by friends and relatives recommendations. 17% of them have found information through Internet and only 10% of them with help of travel agency. A brochures (as sources of information) were chosen from the similar part of interviewees (11%).

Table 1: Information source about Istria

How did you learn about our family tourist area?
31% previous stay
28% friends or relatives recommendations
17% internet
11% brochures
10% travel agency

The results shown in Table 2 indicate that more than half of interviewees think that they are partly informed about tourist offer in Istria and 22% of them think that they are not well enough informed about tourist offer. 23% of them think that they are fully informed about the tourist offer in Istria.

Table 2: Level of information about Istria

Are you well informed about the tourist offer in Istria?
55% partly
23% fully
22% not well enough

Further, only 23% of respondents reported that they were in Istria for the first time, whilst 77% have already been in Istria (Table 3).

Table 3: Frequency of visits at the seaside in Istria

Are you staying in Istria?
77% more times
23% first time

Moreover, Table 4 reveals that the majority of respondents (80%) travelled to Istria individually, whilst 20% of them said that they travelled in organized groups. Given the sample, the respondents demonstrated a preference for individual travel to Istria. We suspect that those two facts are related; being in Istria for the first time and coming in organized groups. Perhaps those who came for the first time are coming in organized groups and after that they are coming individually.

Table 4: Way of coming

You came here?
80% individually
20% organized groups

With regard to the form of accompaniment (Table 5), we have noticed that almost 40% of respondents travelled to Istria on a vacation as a couple and less than 30% of them came with their family. However, only 7% of interweaved tourists travelled alone in destination.

Table 5: Forms of accompaniment at the seaside in Istria

Are you staying on vacation?
39% as a couple
28% with family
26% with friends
7% alone

Table 6 depicts that there was similar percentage of tourists that are planning to stay from 4 to 7 days and those who are staying just for a weekend.

Table 6: Length of stay at the seaside in Istria

How long are you planning to stay in Istria?
45% 4-7 days
44% weekend
9% 8-14 days
2% more

In terms of tourists' motives, the main motive for coming in Istria was vacation at the seaside for more than half of them (52%), while the natural beauties, as the main motive for coming, are chosen only 23% of tourists. Vicinity of destination (11%) has similarly weight as entertainment (10%). Prices and sport are the lowest measured motive for coming with 1% each. Further, other reasons (8%) that they chose individually were: visiting friends and relatives, gastronomy, business and health tourism and hospitality. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Tourists' motives at the seaside in Istria

Which was your main motive for coming in Istria?
52% vacation at the seaside
17% natural beauties
11% vicinity
10% entertainment
8% other reasons
1% prices
1% sport

The central question of the research was the next one. As shown in Table 8, almost half of the interviewees answered that they would maybe decide to spend their vacation in rural area while one third of tourists answered that they would not chose that kind of holidays. Answer "maybe" is perhaps related to the fact that tourists are not acquainted with tourist offer in rural area. But there is no certainty that they would actually choose rural area over coastal, despite knowledge of tourist offer, considering the main motive for coming in destination was vacation at the seaside.

Table 8: Attitude to holidays in a rural area

Would you ever decide to spend your vacation on rural area - in village (10-30km from sea)?
47% maybe
29% no
24% yes

As shown in Table 9, interest in alternative tourist offer is fragmented. However, trips, visiting nature parks and hiking are top three activities of interest for tourists that were interviewed. Results are very resembling in answers and we quote here only those activities that have reached till 5% of answers.

Table 9: Interests of tourists at the seaside in Istria

Besides pleasant accommodation and ecologically produced food in rural areas are you interested in:
15% trips
13% hiking
12% wine tasting
12% nature parks
8% wine roads
8% bike paths
6% participate in food preparation
5% tennis
5% horseback riding

Additionally, with the following two questions we were rating gastronomy offer in destination. Tourists were asked to rate adjectives: diversified, uniform, international, domestic, ecologically produced and conventional cultivated with the 5-degree Likert-type scale. Here we present average values of rated units. Table 10 shows that respondents agreed generally that the gastronomy offer is diversified (mean score = 3, 7) and domestic (mean score = 3, 4). Variability coefficient is helping us to detect how homogeny was the answers (rates). Lower values of variability coefficient (- 33%) mean safer interpretation of rated units.

Table 10: Rating of gastronomy offer in accommodation facilities

How would you rate gastronomy offer in accommodation facilities?		
	average	Var. coef.
Diversified	3,7	24,6
Uniform	2,6	42,4
International	3,3	27,7
Domestic	3,4	31,6
natural ecologically produced	2,9	35,7
conventional cultivated	3,0	52,8

Table 11: Rating of gastronomy offer in a la cart restaurants

How would you rate gastronomy offer in a la cart restaurants?		
	average	Var. coef.
Diversified	3,8	25,7
Uniform	2,6	43,8
International	3,5	25,5
Domestic	3,4	29,9
natural ecologically produced	3,0	34,6
conventional cultivated	3,0	22

The findings of the research show that less than half of interweaved are inclined to ecologically produced food (44%) and consequently the same percent of them are prepared to pay 15-20% more for ecologically produced food (Table 12). An interesting fact is that rather high percent of them (34%) does not prefer ecologically produced food. That is why is reasonably high (45%) part of those which are not willing to pay more for that kind of food (Table 13).

Table 12: Interest in ecologically produced food

How would you rate ecologically produced food in the shops and market and are you interested in that kind of food?
44% interested
34% not prefer
22% not satisfactory

Table 13: Willingness to pay more for ecologically produced food

Are you willing to pay and how much more for ecologically produced food?
45% not willing to pay more
44% 15-20% more
11% 20-30% more

The results in Table 14 show that only 40% of tourists has fulfilled their expectations by staying in Istria but despite the fact, reported in Table 15, that the overwhelming majority (71%) of respondents claimed they will come again. Only 2% of respondents said they will not come again.

Table 14: Expectation fulfilment of tourists at the seaside in Istria

Your stay in Istria has fulfilled your expectations?
58% partly
40% fully
2% not at all

Table 15: Repeat visit at the seaside in Istria in the future

Will you visit us again?
71% yes
27% maybe
2% no

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Destination is a competitive unit which must be run as a strategic business unit, while tourists are “seeing” destination as a complete experience or integral tourist product. That is the step away from a massive tourism which is still present in typical coastal destinations in Europe. New approach in planning activities, fresh ideas in tourist offer shaping and sustainable (responsible) tourism is the way of living in modern times for reaching competitive positions in tourism market.

The planning process of a “new” destination demands carefully prepared and structured phases. One of them is the potential tourists’ analyses, their attitudes and expectations about the tourist offer that could be shaped from the attractions and other resources which could become the tourist resources.

The study represents a first attempt to research the possible integration of coastal and countryside tourism in Istria. Coastal destinations often suffer of seasonality and high pressures related to this. Agarwal (2002) argue that the great majority of European seaside resorts have reached a mature or post-mature stage in the last two decades. Observed coastal destination share the same faith. Therefore, resorts tend to restructure by regulating the volume of tourist arrivals, reselecting target segments and repositioning the destination, and in many cases improving connections to the hinterland, preserving, protecting and enhancing their natural and cultural resources, authenticity and developing “heritage capital” (Costa 2004, 263).

In our case the planned destination at Istrian countryside is possible supplemental, richer and subtle part of existent coastal destination, but with changing preferences and tourism market trends in near future, it could possible become a new independent, self-sufficient destination.

The profile of potential tourist for planned destination is introduced. The results show that preliminary visit and word of mouth from friends and relatives were the most cited channels of information about Istria. Further, the results show that the main motive for coming in Istria was vacation at the seaside, 4-7 days long stay of tourists who came mostly individually, they have learn about tourist offer on the base of previous stay. Most important, more than a half of respondents revealed that the main motive to visit Istria was the holiday at the seaside. In accordance to this, less than 30% of them are interested in spending in rural areas. Hiking, trips and visiting natural parks are the most wanted ways of spending their time on holidays. Half of them are interested in ecologically produced food, but not willing to pay more. Profile of this particular segment of tourists that was caught by our research is only partly interested in sustainable tourist offers in Istrian countryside. It can be derived that they would like to be involved in the contact with the nature and the ways of life in this area.

That indicate that interviewed tourists in coastal destinations are potential tourists in countryside in only small number and that it would be necessary to find additionally the new segments of tourists (ecologically sensitive, environmentally responsible, high educated and sophisticated) for our proposed area of research to become a modern competitive destination. Knowing that changing travel motives and guests preferences is shaping the new destinations, it is possible to expect that Istrian countryside soon would become interesting also for the coastal tourists. Additionally, these results are important for destination policy makers in the Istrian landscape in providing successful marketing to attract tourists from the coast. It may increase the potential to develop tourism in Istrian countryside.

Finally, it is evident that future research is needed to better understand what would attract tourists located at the Slovenian seaside to visit Istrian countryside. In the future, the research could be extended to cover larger area and identifying factors that affect attitude towards rural tourism in the Istrian countryside.

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